

Running

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Summary: A retelling of the (female) Sole Survivor's journey to find out the truth about what exactly happened to her family in Vault 111 with John Hancock as the primary companion. SSxHancock (\*It's Fallout. So there's blood, gore, violence, language, drugs and other suggestive themes. It also contains spoilers from both main and minor storylines.\*)

## 1. Chapter 1

A sweat broke out on the back of my neck, the familiar tense thrill of lining up a shot settling into my shoulders. My finger was just itching to pull the trigger but the ghoul was still thrashing around too much for me to be able to call it a clean shot.

Finally, she stopped moving. I didn't hesitate. She fell, never knowing what hit her. I grinned.

"Nice shot," my companion, Hancock said approvingly. Suddenly his face grew serious. "Do you see that, too?"

I glanced back through my scope.

Damn. There were a lot more ghouls than I had thought. And now they were all up and walking around.

"Well, they're not going to shoot themselves," Hancock grinned at me. He pulled out his double-barrel shot gun and began sneaking down the hill. I switched to my laser pistol and followed him.

Together, we cleared out the feral nest.

"It's a shame these ferals keep causing problems for the locals," I murmured, searching their corpses for loot.

"Take what you need, I'll stand watch," was his only reply. I glanced back over my shoulder at him, studying him. His back was tense. He always got like that when something was eating at him. And I don't mean the radroaches that plague the Commonwealth.

"Is everything okay, Hancock?"

"Yeah, it just brings me down. I just need some more chems."

"Well, you're in luck," I said as I pulled a syringe with Psycho out of the ghouls' pocket beside me. I tossed the vial to him.

"Nah, you should keep it. I'm more of a Mentats ghoul myself." I caught it as he tossed it back to me, putting it in one of the many pockets on my vault suit. I felt him watching me as I went through the rest of the bodies. Finally, I turned my light brown eyes to look at him. "You gonna wear that thing forever, sister?"

"For now," I replied softly. I couldn't bring myself to stop wearing it yet. Or my wedding ring. They were the last things I had left from Vault 111. The last things I had of my family...when we were still a family. And we hadn't been a family for over 200 years apparently. Nate, my husband, had been shot in front of me while the Institute was taking our son, Shaun. I've been combing the Commonwealth looking for him and the bastards that took both of them from me. But lately things there have been messy, too. The more that I find out, the more that I don't want to know. And the more that I don't want to know, the more I have to know.

Hancock is one of the few people that understands this about me. He doesn't press me when I'm sullen or silent. Just like I try not to press him when the same mood strikes him. But we can't keep running forever.

"Where to now?"

I looked up to meet his all-black eyes, replying, "I guess we should head back to Preston and let him know that this place is cleared out. You up for following me around some more?"

His lips lifted into a faint smirk. "For now."

I chuckled, checking the PipBoy on my arm and discerning how far away from the Sanctuary we currently were. Not too far. Maybe a few hours worth of travel time at the most. It would probably be dark by the time we got there. Good thing neither of us are afraid of the dark.

It was an hour after dark by the time that we reached Sanctuary Hills. I was beginning to tire from the long day and was looking forward to a restful sleep. But, knowing Preston, he'd want us to head out on some other mission right away. I'm all for helping people, but I definitely need to sleep in a decent bed tonight. I didn't even know when the last time I had slept on even a mattress was. And sleeping bags in random Raiders' dens just doesn't cut it on an everyday basis.

"We cleared out the ghouls' den, Preston," I informed him as we walked into the house he was resting in. He was covered in dirt and grime and had probably been tending to the crops all day. Say what

you want about Preston Garvey, he's a good leader. He's willing to break his back doing the work right alongside the underlings.

"Good, I'll send some settlers there to set up camp. Here's some caps for your trouble, General," he said, handing me a fistful of caps.

"No problem, I'm happy to help." But I certainly wasn't going to turn down caps, either. It may be the end of the world but a girl's gotta survive. "Anything else?"

"There's another settlement that needs our help. We have to let them know that the Minutemen are there when they need us." He eyed me suddenly. "When's the last time you slept?"

"Three days ago," Hancock answered before I could. Preston raised his eyebrows before turning to me. I furrowed my red brows in thought before nodding. Yes, that was right. It had been three days since we had taken turns resting at a rundown building that had belonged to a group of Raiders.

"I'll send someone else to deal with it," he decided. "You get some rest. We'll find something else for you to do in the morning."

"Alright, if anything happens though, wake me up."

"You need to take better care of yourself, General. We don't need you keeling over from exhaustion and getting your head blown off in the middle of a fight." Hancock opened his mouth to speak, probably about to assure him that that's what the drugs he gives me are for. "And, no, chems are not a valid substitute for sleep."

Hancock chuckled. I wearily shook my head. I was far too tired to deal with this at the moment. They get along well enough but Preston is too uptight for Hancock and Hancock is too rough around the edges for Preston. I think Preston assumes that I'm more like him than Hancock...but he's never travelled with me for more than a day. Hancock has been travelling with me for a month now.

"Where to now, General?" Hancock questioned. "I know you're not going to want to sleep here."

"I hate sleeping here," I answered bluntly. "May as well use the truck stop." He nodded.

"After you."

It took us about thirty minutes to get to the Red Rocket Truck Stop near Sanctuary Hills. My husband and I had stopped for gas here many times on our way to visit my parents in Pennsylvania. They had died when the atomic bomb went off, though, I'm sure. I'm also sure that Mom and Dad died together. They were always together. That's how Nate and I had been.

But that was a long time ago, even if it only seemed like a few months ago to me. If I was really curious enough, I'm sure I could go down there and try to find my childhood home. Hancock would probably come watch my back. That was a lot of unnecessary time and effort for an answer I already knew to be true.

"Home sweet home," I murmured as I stepped through the garage door. I rubbed my neck, noting that a kink had formed at the base of it.

Still rubbing my neck, I dropped onto the bed I had built upon first finding this place. It was then that I noticed a stiffness in my back as well. Maybe Preston was right and I did need to take better care of myself. Yeah, I'll just schedule a spa date with my bestie right away. With a groan, I laid down on my stomach and let gravity begin to realign my spine.

It didn't take long for me to drift off to sleep.

## 2. Chapter 2

I awoke groggily, struggling to open my eyelids. It took me a moment to register that it was pitch black out and that Hancock was covering my body with his. "There's something outside," he breathed into my ear softly. I nodded my head slightly to show that I had heard and understood him. Adrenaline started pumping through my veins as I heard whatever was outside start to shuffle around.

Slowly, Hancock slid off of me and onto the floor into a crouch, sneaking out of the doorway and towards the outside. I followed suit, drawing my .44 pistol from its holster. He held up his hand to hold me off, listening intently. I strained my ears to listen.

Hancock slowly crept backwards. "I think it's moving on."

"Was that a Deathclaw?" I questioned, listening to it move away. It was very far away now.

"Yeah, I didn't want to worry you. But it started sniffing around outside."

My eyes widened in understanding. "So you tried to cover my scent with yours."

"They don't find ghoulish flesh as tasty."

"Thanks."

"No problem. Now let's get back to sleep."

I smiled at him, thankful that he had saved my life.

The next time I woke, I felt fully rested. And it was bright and sunny out. Hancock was already out of bed but I don't think ghouls need quite as much sleep as humans do. Probably due to the fact that they're immortal.

I rolled out of bed and made my way to the cooking pit to cook up some food that I had stashed in the cooler. I found Hancock sitting outside and keeping watch. "Hungry?" I asked, carrying the cooler under one arm. He looked up at me.

"I wouldn't say no to a hot meal."

"I could throw together some omelettes?"

"Those Mirelurks were a pain in the ass. I'd gladly eat those eggs you swiped from their nests."

"To the living go the spoils," we both said in unison.

"Huh, apparently I've used that line one too many times."

"Or I just pay attention more than the other people you've been around lately."

"You are more perceptive than most. Smarter, too."

"I think you just need better friends, Hancock."

"That's why I'm hanging out with you now. I've got to sharpen up the ol' killer instinct."

"Well, I'll see what I can do about that. No guarantees, though," I smirked, walking away and towards the cooking pit. I began preparing the food, making sure to ration things out so that we wouldn't have to worry about it too much for a few more days. Maybe a week if we were lucky. "Food's ready."

He wordlessly took the plate that I handed him. I sat beside him on the ground, looking out at the empty horizon. We ate in silence and he took our plates after we had finished to wash them off in a nearby stream.

I stood up to stretch while he did that. It was about time we should head back to Sanctuary Hills. Preston was probably worried.

"You want to head out again already?"

"Probably should."

"After you."

I paused and studied him. "You don't think I should go back there yet."

"I didn't say anything of the sort."

"Alright, let's take a break from that. What do you suggest?"

"Why don't we take a visit back to Diamond City? I'm sure Valentine could use some help."

"You hate Diamond City."

"I don't hate the City. Just most of the people."

I studied him, trying to discern what his motive was. I couldn't figure it out. I often can't figure him out, though. That's probably why I find him as fascinating as I do. And that's also why he's been my companion far longer than anyone else. Sure, Valentine was a companion of mine at one point. I even helped him take down an old nemesis from before his memories were ever installed on his hard drive. Oh, I should probably add that Valentine is a Synth. He's one

of the fully functional ones that looked human at one point. Now his synthetic skin covering is all but worn away. I think he keeps it like that to remind himself that he isn't human. He's not even really Nick Valentine. But that's his story to tell, not mine.

"Alright," I exhaled. "Let's go see what Valentine has for us."

### 3. Chapter 3

I wiped off some blood mixed with sweat off of my helmet as we neared the gates to Diamond City. Hancock pulled his hat down a little lower as we passed the guards. They aren't very fond of ghouls here-or Synths. But Nick refuses to leave here and nobody, not even Hancock, can avoid coming here at some point or another. I met Nick through a mutual friend of ours that lives here. Piper. She's a journalist and runs Publick Occurrences with her younger sister, Nat. They're both fiery and out for the truth. I like that about them.

We walked through the marketplace, following the brightly lit neon signs advertising Valentine's detective agency. Eventually, we found the door leading into the office and walked inside. Valentine was shuffling through case files while his secretary, Ellie, was filing away the finished ones.

"Hey, Valentine," I greeted.

"I'd ask if you need any help, but I see you've got some capable hands with you," Nick greeted with a grin. "Any chance you're here to lend me a hand instead?"

"Yeah, Hancock suggested we come visit and see if you were doing alright here."

"I could definitely use some help. Here's a case that I haven't had the time for recently. It should be fairly simple. A local named Earl Sterling has gone missing. He used to work down at the Dugout Inn. His friend, Vadim Bobrov and his brother, Yefim, run the place. Vadim is the one that opened the case, so he might have some more information-or a key to Earl's house at the very least."

"We're on it."

"Thanks. I'll use all the help I can get around here. We're still being flooded by missings persons cases. The Institute is still nabbing people off the streets."

"Do you have any leads on that?"

"I might be able to scrounge up some information from my sources. I'll see what I can find out while you're tracking down Earl."

"Sounds like a plan," I nodded. Hancock and I headed back out into the alley.

"Come on, the Dugout is this way," he said, taking the lead for once.

"You've been there before, I take it?"

"Something like that."

Several hours later, we discovered that Earl had been saving up his caps from tending the bar to get a facial reconstructive surgery from Doc Crocker. But Crocker botched the surgery and accidentally killed Earl. The insane asshole almost blew my head off, too, but Hancock shot him in the knee. The honor of shooting him in the head was left to me.

Doctor Sun found us in the cellar and, thankfully, believed what I said had happened. He even volunteered to clean up the mess so that we didn't have to stick around for it. Next time I need supplies or medical attention, I'll definitely be coming to him for it.

"Thanks for saving my head back there," I thanked Hancock as we headed back to Valentine's to break the news to him and Ellie. I'd leave it up to him to tell Vadim. I really didn't want to deal with that guy again this soon. His personality is rather eccentric.

"It's too pretty to end up in chunks all over the floor," he said casually.

"Thanks, I think."

Our conversation was cut short as we entered the detective agency. We explained what had transpired to Nick and Ellie and were compensated with some caps for our trouble.

"I didn't manage to find out much, but I did manage to find out about an agency that might be able to help you get closer to the Institute."

"Is that even possible? Nobody seems to know anything about the Institute."

"The Railroad does."

"The Railroad?"

"I've heard of those guys," Hancock nodded. "Secretive bunch. They help renegade Synths out when they escape from the Institute somehow."

"Right," Valentine agreed. "Dr. Amari said to follow the Freedom Trail."

"As in the historical markings along the roads of Boston?" I questioned. "That seems too easy."

"There's probably a code or something somewhere. She didn't have any more information and, to be honest, none of us have really met anyone from the Railroad other than their couriers."

"Well, we'll have to find a way inside and see what they know."

"Good luck. Let me know how it turns out."

"We'll keep in touch," I nodded. Hancock and I returned to the

alleyway. It had begun to rain and soon, a combination of dirt and grime began to wash off of our clothes.

"Maybe we should hole up for a while before heading back. Looks like it's going to be a bad storm." A glance up at the sky made me think the same.

"Maybe that's not such a bad idea. We probably won't be able to see anything soon. Any ideas? I know you're not fond of here."

"That's putting it lightly." He paused. "You're not gonna like it."

"You're in charge of entertaining Vadim," I sighed. "Lead the way." He chuckled while I rolled my eyes. I'm sure there was somewhere else would could have killed time. There are other bars here. But I'm also sure that Hancock picked the Dugout Inn mostly just to annoy me. He seems to enjoy that almost as much as Mentats.

Hancock held the door open for me as we entered the Inn. Vadim was worked up about something and immediately narrowed in on me, going on and on about the kid on the radio and how he wanted to hire us to kill him. Yefim immediately assured me that Vadim wasn't serious. But he definitely sounded serious. When I wouldn't let the matter alone, Vadim himself began to assure me that he didn't mean the kid, Travis any harm.

Rather, he wanted to help Travis gain some self esteem. And since it was a top secret plan, he dragged Hancock and I over to one of the back rooms to reveal his grand plan. It was a terrible plan.

"You want to pay some guys to pick a fight with Travis but you want me to tell him to stand up for himself to them. Why do I even need to be involved in this?"

"Because Travis would never stand up for himself on his own. He'll need you there for support."

"You mean he's never been in a fight before."

"I don't think he could win a fight staged or otherwise. And you look capable."

"That's not the point. I don't think this is such a good plan."

"Nonsense, it's fool-proof! It'll happen tonight." With that, he left me staring after him in exasperation while Hancock leaned casually against the wall.

"This is why I didn't want to come here."

"Come on, I'll buy you a drink. What's your poison?"

"The darkest beer they have. I'm going to go get a room before Vadim can come up with any more crazy schemes. I'll tell Yefim to let you know what number it is."



Several minutes after paying for a room, Hancock entered with a few beers , two cups, and a bottle of whiskey. "I was never a fan of the stuff myself, but this is what they had," he said and handed me one of the beers.

"Gwinette Stout. I used to drink these all the time before we got sealed in the Vault. I've always been a beer drinker. Well, beer and whiskey." Hancock popped a couple Mentats and followed it up with some whiskey.

"Whiskey and bourbon. And the chems. They were how I passed most of my time before I became a ghoul."

"So the chems aren't just a ghoul thing, then?"

"Not for me. I used to sneak over to Goodneighbor for the good ones. The ones here were always kind of weak."

"Wait, you used to live here in Diamond City?"

"Born and raised," he nodded.

"No wonder you know the streets so well. What made you leave?"

"McDonough."

"You were friends?"

"Something like that." His tone indicated that he wanted to drop the matter, so I didn't press him any further. "What was Sanctuary Hill like before?"

I looked up at him, startled by the question, to find him studying my face.

"Sorry, I didn't mean-"

"No, it's alright. It was nice. Safe. A good place for kids. And there were a lot of kids there. A lot of elderly couples, too." I paused, remembering the day that the bomb had gone off. "Most of them didn't even make it into the Vault that day. And I'm the only one that's survived from there-well, other than Shaun. But I don't even know where he is." I looked down at the golden wedding band on my finger.

"We'll find him, you know."

"I know. I'm just worried about what we'll find. And what the Institute did with him."

"You're too young to be so cynical."

"I was a lawyer. It was my job to be cynical."

"Lawyer, huh?"

"Harvard alumna."

"So Mentats don't really do anything for you."

I shrugged and finished my beer. "My father used to tell me that everyone had their own special gifts but I was special. I got two: a smart mind and a smart mouth."

Hancock laughed. "Sounds right."

"I get both from him." He probably would have liked Hancock, I mused as I opened a second beer. "He probably would have liked having you around."

"Not with this ugly mug," he grinned. But his grin had changed into something a little darker-more rueful. My face softened as I looked him in the eye.

"I don't think he would have cared. Neither do I, for that matter."

"You really must be crazy."

"I've been called worse things," I brushed it off casually, drinking more of my beer.

"What's on your mind?"

"I was just thinking about what you said earlier. About how you knew McDonough?" I paused and he nodded for me to continue. "How exactly did you know him?"

"Guy's my brother," he shrugged. "Things weren't as tough for us growing up. A little stricter than I would have liked, but I thought that he and I had had a decent childhood. Until he decides to run for mayor. 'Mankind for McDonough.' That was his campaign speech. Anti-ghoul. Before ya know it, you got families with kids lining up to drag folks they called 'neighbor' out of their homes to throw 'em to the ruins."

"So, wait, you two grew up together?"

"Oh yeah. Grew up in a little shack together on the waterfront. He was the typical older brother. Entitled, punchy-liked to slap rotten tatoes down my shirt and slap my back. But I never thought he'd be capable of something like what they did to those ghouls."

"I'm guessing it wasn't pretty."

"No. It wasn't. He managed to get the city to turn on the ghouls when he got elected. I should've killed him right there in his office when it went down. He was just standing there watching. He was proud. I begged him to call it off but he wouldn't, claiming it was the will of the people. He couldn't betray the voters." Hancock's face saddened, his eyes dropping to his glass of whiskey. "And then he smiled this hideous, fucking mile long smile. He never smiled like that when we were kids. I didn't even recognize him."

"You didn't recognize him?"

"It was like he was a totally different person. Didn't seem like the guy I grew up with. When I first heard the rumors that he had been

replaced with a Synth, thinking back on that night, it made a lot of sense. But I dunno. I don't think I buy it. I've seen him since then and there's no way they copied him that perfectly. Even got his tightass walk. But at the time, I just needed to get the hell away from him and that damned city."

"They murdered those ghouls. I knew the guy was dirty, but I didn't realize he was that dirty." I wondered if Piper knew. I wasn't going to be the one to tell her. She'd have to figure it out on her own.

"I wasn't a ghoul at that point, so I didn't have to leave, but I just couldn't bring myself to stay in that cesspool after that. I managed to track down a couple of the families that had survived and lead 'em to Goodneighbor. But most of them couldn't get used to the lifestyle. I brought them food for a couple of weeks, but after a while, they just disappeared. Folks in Diamond City signed their death warrants. And all the good people were just willing to sit by and watch. I felt like I was the only one who saw how screwed up things were. I couldn't just pretend any more. Still feel that way. Or I did until I met you." I smiled at him for that, reaching across the table and giving his hand a squeeze. He caught my hand and held it tightly for a moment before pulling his hand away. "I know I run my mouth, but having someone who sees the world for what it is and is willing to do something about it-it's meant a lot to me. And I'm damn lucky to have you as a friend."

Maybe it was the two beers. Maybe it had been the look on his face when he said it-happiness, pride, fear, and a little sadness. Or maybe it was just being so close to him for so long: instead of answering him, I leaned over the table and pulled the collar of his jacket to bring his face closer to mine and kissed him gently.

He was staring at me in wide-eyed confusion when I pulled away.

"You're a good guy, Hancock, don't sell yourself short."

"What was that for?"

I smirked lightly at him, raising my eyebrows. "Friends? That's what this is?"

"You definitely take me by surprise, Rae. But now that you've brought it up, I have been having slightly more impure thoughts than usual. Maybe we'll get to...act on those. Heh. But I guess we should go get that kid out of that fight his buddy fixed up. After you."

## 5. Chapter 5

As we walked out to the bar, I could see that some poor kid in jeans and an old letterman jacket was being bullied by two mercenary types. They didn't look like the decent mercenaries, either. No, they looked a little closer to raiders. Just in different clothes.

"I don't even know what I did," Travis said, holding up his hands to diffuse the situation. "I don't want any trouble."

"You okay?" I asked, putting a hand on his shoulder and looking up at

the mercenaries.

"I just wanted a drink. I don't want any trouble."

"Why don't you stand up for yourself? They're not going to do anything about it."

"I can't do that!"

"Trust me. We've got your back." Hancock smiled and nodded from his other side. "And we're pretty tough."

"I dunno."

"You shouldn't let people push you around so much. They won't do it so much if you have more confidence in yourself."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm not gonna give you my caps. And you should leave me alone," he said shakily. He definitely didn't sound confident. The mercenaries noticed that, too.

"What, you're gonna stand up to us?" the one in the greaser jacket and blue jeans asked. "I don't think we can allow that."

"Not this time," the other one agreed. Hancock and I shared a glance before we began swinging our fists. Neither of us do much in terms of melee action since we prefer guns. But there's something therapeutic about slamming my fists into something that's always appealed to me. Before the fallout, and before the Vault, I spent a lot of time at the gym beating defenseless punching bags into the ground.

Before long, the three of us had the two thugs on the ground. But things didn't quite go as planned. The rest of the people in the bar began yelling for security while the mercenaries ran off. Travis, however, wasn't any more confident than he had been initially. It probably had something to do with the fact that the thugs had sworn revenge before hobbling out.

"That didn't quite go as planned," Vadim said sadly.

"Ya think?" Hancock asked.

"I've got it! Have you seen Scarlett around? I've noticed Travis looking at her and I've noticed Scarlett looking at Travis. You get what I'm saying?"

"Yes?" I raised an eyebrow. Where exactly was this creep going with his story?

"I need you to suggest to her that she should visit Travis."

"Why do I have to be the one to do that?"

"Because you're a woman! And it would be weird if I suggested it to her since I'm her boss. That's just over the line." Well, at least he has some sense. I sighed.

"Fine, I'll go find Scarlett and see if she'll visit Travis. That might perk up his spirits." I put my modified Synth helmet on before stepping outside. Hancock followed. It was still raining but not

quite as badly. I've never been fond of the rain. "This is going to take forever."

"Let's try the waterfront," he suggested.

"Alright," I nodded. We began walking there, searching through the few people outside in vain. Finally, we found her sitting on a bench looking out at the water. "Hey, Scarlett," I greeted. She looked over at me with a slight frown.

"I'm on a break," she answered.

"I know, but I came to talk to you about Travis."

"Travis, what about him?"

"Maybe you should go pay him a visit. I think he could use some cheering up after what happened at the Inn."

"I dunno. I think it might be bad if I go over there now. He's probably sensitive right now."

"No, I really think it would do some good for him. I've seen the way he looks at you."

"Really?"

"Scarlett, I'm a girl. I can tell this sort of thing."

"Alright, yeah, I'll head on over right now. I'm worried about him anyway. Thanks, Rae!"

We watched her head off in the direction of where Travis lived. "Now hopefully that's the end of that. Let's go back and let Vadim know and then get out of here before he ropes us into anything else."

"What do you mean he's gone?" I asked Yefim, disbelief on my face.

"Those thugs came back and took him. They kept saying that he owed them money but Vadim refused to pay them because his plan didn't work out," he replied. Yefim looked incredibly worried at the thought. I didn't blame him.

"Don't worry, I'm sure Vadim is fine. But Hancock and I will go get him back. Any idea where they went?"

"They mentioned something about a factory nearby. Here, I'll mark it on your map." He marked the location on the map on my Pip-Boy.

"We'll get him back," I repeated. "We should let Travis know what's going on."

"Think he'll be able to handle it?"

"We'll find out. If not, maybe he'll figure out that a life so mundane isn't anything to worry about after he's had to fight for his life."

"Tough love."

"Sometimes that's the only kind you'll learn from." I found the trailer Travis lived in and knocked. He opened it, Scarlett peeking over his shoulder. "Those thugs came back and took Vadim. I thought you'd want to know."

"Oh god, this is all my fault," Travis moaned.

"Does it really matter whose fault it is?" I questioned. For the record, it's Vadim's fault. But I wasn't going to point that out right this second. "All that matters is that Vadim is in trouble. Are you coming with us or not?"

"Yeah, I should. I feel responsible." He grabbed a pistol from a trunk nearby, loading a magazine of bullets into it. "Let's go."

"Be careful!" Scarlett said, kissing his cheek worriedly. "I'll be at the Inn when you get back."

"We'll be back soon, don't worry too much," I reassured her. Then, to Travis, "ready?"

"No, but let's go anyway." I smiled and nodded. Maybe Vadim's stupid plan would work out anyway.

## 6. Chapter 6

We travelled to the factory nearby. It had stopped raining by then but it was beginning to get dark. By the time this was over, we were going to need some food and a good night's sleep. But, first, time to rescue Vadim.

"You ready?" I asked Travis. He nodded nervously. "Alright. Usually we try to sneak in and take as many down as possible before they notice us. So just stay in the back and let us clear the way as much as we can." He nodded again, this time a little less nervously. Though he couldn't see it through my helmet, I grinned at him. "Don't worry. We do this sort of thing all the time for the Minutemen."

"We've got your back," Hancock nodded. Then, to me, "after you."

I opened the door as silently as possible, proceeding with my sniper rifle drawn. Hancock followed, carrying a sniper rifle of his own. There was a room on the right with an electronic clapping monkey that acted as a motion-sensitive alarm system. Hancock snuck around it and managed to rip the head off to disable it. I took out the sleeping raider in the far corner of the room.

Hancock and I then combed the room for anything useful we could use to modify our weapons and gear. There were a few rolls of duct tape lying around but not much else. We proceeded further down the hall but I brought our small group to a halt by stopping dead just short of the doorway. It looked like the majority of the mercenaries were holed up in here.

I motioned for us to go back a little and then proceeded up the

stairs to the second story. There was a catwalk there. Hancock and I each began lining up shots and started taking down raiders. We managed to take down four before the others noticed. That took out half of them.

"Now it's time for the fun," I told Travis, switching out my sniper rifle for my .44 pistol. The three of us took down the rest of the guys together until only the one holding Vadim hostage was left. I shot him in the forehead as soon as I walked through the door. Vadim looked overjoyed to see me.

"You came for me!" Then, he noticed Travis. "And Travis! You came, too! How did you get him here?"

"He volunteered, actually. It was pretty brave of him." Travis untied Vadim, who stood and immediately gave me a handful of caps.

"Please, take these for the mess that I've caused. I'd better get back to Yefim, he's probably worried sick. Thanks again, friend! You always have a room at the Inn if you need one!" Vadim left and I turned to Travis.

"Thanks for your help back there, you held your own pretty well."

"Oh man, that was awesome! I can't believe I was so worried about that every day stuff. That's nothing when you've got bullets flying at you and you're fighting for your life," he realized. "Thanks, you really opened my eyes today. If there's ever anything I can do for you, you just let me know. I'll even play a special request for you on the radio if you want."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind, Travis."

Hancock and I got back to Diamond City well after dark. It turns out the place we had cleared out the raiders and mercenaries and rescued Vadim from was a brewery back in its prime. That meant lots of free beer. And our newfound friendship with Yefim and Vadim meant that they would chill them for us for free.

Which brings us to the present time of drinking some beer and whiskey before settling in to head over to Goodneighbor first thing in the morning. Travelling at night isn't exactly terrifying, but it's a lot harder to see at night. Hancock can see a little bit better thanks to the fact that he's a ghoul but that doesn't help me very much. There are chems for it, of course, but they're both hard to make and hard to come by.

So, if we can, we sleep indoors at night or at the truck stop.

"These beers are growing on me," I admitted as I took another sip of the Gwinette stout. "Good thing they held up through the fallout."

"They might not hold up for much longer at the rate you drink 'em," Hancock mused. I smirked, taking another sip in reply. He laughed. "It really doesn't bother you, travelling with me?"

"Not at all," I shook my head. "You're a good guy, Hancock. That's a

rare thing to find around here."

"Travelling with a ghoul makes most people squeamish. Even one with my kind of charisma."

"Well I'm not most people. And it's pretty hard to make me squeamish over something like that. You aren't my first companion out here but you are my favorite."

"Oh yeah?"

"You understand my perfect blend of helping people but not being afraid of violence."

"If people need help, we help 'em. If people need hurtin', we hurt 'em."

I laughed. "I'll definitely drink to that." I finished my beer before succumbing to a yawn. "But for now I'm going to get some sleep for the night. It's been a long day."

"That's one word for it." I took off the outer layerings of my armor and placed them next to my helmet near the bed. There wasn't much of a need to wear it while I slept in a place as populated as this. I settled into the inner spot of the bed, relaxing into the soft padding. Perfect for side-sleepers like me. The beds here were well maintained. Vadim might be a pain in my ass, but he and Yefim definitely run a decent inn.

I heard Hancock shuffling around behind me before turning out the light and settling in next to me. A few moments later, he tentatively put his hand over my waist. He was tense. Worried. I reached down and pulled his arm tighter around me. That was all it took for him to relax. And that was all that it took for me to relax and fall asleep for the night.

## 7. Chapter 7

I woke up before Hancock the next morning. At some point in the night, I had ended up using his chest for a pillow. Gently, I pulled myself out from under his arm and dug some water out of one of the coolers in the room. I had gotten through half of it by the time he woke up.

"Morning, Sunshine," he greeted. I smiled in response, handing him a water. He sat down at the table across from me and began to drink it. "What time is it?"

"Just after seven. So the sun is up now. That means as soon as we're hydrated and fed, we can leave."

"Sounds good."

"I'll go see if Vadim has any food ready yet."

"Nah, let me. You always get the food." He set his water down before slipping out of the room. I began stretching out my joints while I waited for him to return. I was glad that I was cryogenically frozen so young. I'm not sure that I'd be doing so well if I were older. It



seems like that would make surviving here extremely difficult. Come to think of it, none of the Vault dwellers were that old. There wasn't anyone over 50 in our Vault. Nate and I were among the youngest at 32. (Well, he was 31. I was a few months older than him.) We were the only ones with a child, though. I don't think the technicians counted on that since Shaun had to go into the same cryo-chamber as Nate.

But the Institute found out about him either way.

"Softshell Mirelurk meat and deviled eggs okay?"

"Yeah, that's perfect," I grinned.

After we ate and replenished our supply of food and water, we headed back out into the Commonwealth. It was time to find Dr. Amari for a little bit more information than Valentine had given us. Hancock agreed that it was probably a good idea-and it was relatively nearby.

The journey there was painless and clean. We didn't even run into any ferals or molerats. It only took us about an hour and a half to get there.

When we did arrive in Goodneighbor, everyone we came across greeted us in a friendly manner. Hancock might not be accepted everywhere, but he was well liked here. Probably because he had saved so many lives. After knowing a little more about him, it made perfect sense. The citizens had equal amounts of respect, fear, and love for him. He took out those that needed to be taken out and helped those that needed to be helped.

Finally we came to the Memory Den. It's where Dr. Amari works. And, quite frankly, it creeps me out a little even though I find it tremendously cool. About a month ago, I had been here to walk through the memories of a modified human who had tried to kill me. Kellogg. It turns out that he wasn't just a mercenary. He was also a coward who had loved someone and lost them. If I had made a few different choices in my life, I might have become exactly like him after waking up from cryo. But I didn't make the same choices that he had. And that meant that I was a target for the type of people that would employ someone like them.

Valentine had helped me take him down. And then we brought the Synth part of his brain here to Dr. Amari, who temporarily installed the memories into Nick and then connected my brain to theirs to sift through his memories. I can officially cross sifting around in a dead man's brain that's connected to my friend's brain off of the list of things I haven't done yet. It wasn't exactly a place I had wanted to return to.

And now here I am again. Back at the brain cinema.

"Place like this'll give a deathclaw nightmares," Hancock murmured. I smiled as I removed my helmet and shook out my shaggy red hair. We went through the various rooms until we came to Dr. Amari's lab.

"Hey Doc," I greeted. She looked up from her terminal and smiled.

"Rae! What a pleasant surprise. And I see you brought the Mayor with you, too. I hope this isn't a cause for me to be concerned."

"Not at all, Dr. Amari. Hancock's just been travelling with me lately."

"That's a relief. Hopefully he's not giving you too much trouble. What can I do for you?"

"We're here for a tip that you gave Valentine. About the Railroad?"

"Ah, yes. I received a message from one of my contacts there. It just said: 'follow the freedom trail.'"

"Does that mean the literal Freedom Trail?"

"That's what I assumed it to mean. But that way is dangerous. It's filled with Raiders and Super Mutants-and possibly even Synths that are still under the Institute's control."

"You ain't got nothin' to worry about with me watching your back," Hancock assured me.

"I think I'm in good hands."

End  
file.